

RESOLUTIONS REFERRED TO PUBLIC SAFETY POLICY COMMITTEE

- ♦1 A RESOLUTION CALLING UPON THE GOVERNOR AND LEGISLATURE TO ENACT LEGISLATION THAT WOULD CORRECT INEFFICIENCIES IN THE AUDIT SYSTEM, DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM AND INEQUITIES IN THE FORMULAS FOR DISTRIBUTING COURT ORDERED ARREST AND CITATION FINES, FEES AND ASSESSMENTS GENERATED BY LOCAL GOVERNMENT.

Source: City of Glendora

Referred to: Revenue & Taxation Policy Committee

Recommendation to General Resolutions Committee:

WHEREAS, the primary purpose of criminal and traffic laws is to improve safety for the public, where the cost involved to implement enforcement falls primarily upon local law enforcement agencies throughout the State; and

WHEREAS, if State laws are to be effectively enforced then local cities must have a fair revenue structure to pay the cost of making arrests and issuing citations for criminal and traffic violators; and

WHEREAS, the significant inequity in the amount cities receive in relation to the full cost of a citation and/or arrest results in an unfair distribution of revenue to cities that are generated by court fines, fees, surcharges, penalties and assessments levied on offenders; and

WHEREAS, the current inefficiencies in the system makes it practically impossible for cities to insure transparency and effectively audit, administer and manage public funds that are generated by cities and distributed by the State and County; and

WHEREAS, to adequately protect and serve the public during this time of declining revenue and deteriorating services the inequities in the system needs to be changed; and

WHEREAS, court-ordered debt collection and revenue distribution is a complex system where there are few audits, if ever, done to determine if cities are receiving their fair share of disbursements; and

WHEREAS, once a debt has been collected, in whole or in part, distributing the money is not simple as there are over 150 ways collection entities are required to distribute revenue collected from traffic and criminal court debts. Depending on the fine, fee, surcharge or penalty assessment imposed by the court has more than 3,100 separate court fines, fees, surcharges, penalties and assessments levied on offenders that appear in statutes spanning 27 different state code sections; and

WHEREAS, the current system makes it practically impossible for cities to effectively administer and manage public funds that are generated by cities. Because of the complex system cities cannot determine if they are receiving their fair share of the fines collected; and

WHEREAS, Counties and the State have statutory responsibility and power to conduct their audits, while cities do not currently have clear legal standing to demand access to court records for purposes of conducting audits in a thorough and transparent manner which further shrouds the understanding of when and how revenue is distributed; and

WHEREAS, in December 2011 at the request of the Glendora Police Department the Los Angeles Superior Court conducted a sample audit of 15 Glendora Police Department-issued citations from 2010. The results of the sample audit revealed the City of Glendora received about 12% (\$253) of the \$2,063 in paid fines for the 12 of the 15 citations submitted. Three (3) of the citations in the audit were sent to collection or warrants. Based on those results, the city received an average of \$21, while the State and County received an average of \$172 for each of the 12 citations. The percentage breakdown for the city was 12.25% as compared to the State and County's share of 86.75%; and

WHEREAS, issuing a typical vehicle code violation citation can involve up to an hour of the issuing officer's time and the time of a records clerk tasked with entering citations into the database costing approximately \$82 per hour. If the citation is challenged the cost increases another \$135 to cover the cost of court time and handling of the notices associated with such an appeal. Therefore, the cost incurred to issue a citation currently is between \$82 and \$217, while the sample audit reveals the city is receiving about \$21 in cost recovery; and

WHEREAS, officials with Superior Court openly admit that similar results would be expected for almost every jurisdiction in the State issuing citations due to the complexity and "Priority of Distribution" they must follow from the State of California. "Priority Distribution" is triggered when a court reduces a fine for a citation. This process prohibits Judges from reducing penalty assessments and thus the only discretion Judges have in reducing fines, fees and costs is to reduce the base fine, or city portion, of the total fine. This process has a significant impact on the amount of money cities issuing the citation will receive. Rarely is the reduction in the fine taken from other stakeholders. Cities are one of the lowest priorities on the distribution list and often find themselves receiving significantly less share-or no share after deducting State and County fees and surcharges; and now there let it be

RESOLVED by the General Assembly of the League of California Cities, assembled in San Diego on September 7, 2012, that the League of California Cities calls upon the State Legislature and Governor to:

1. Create an efficient system to provide cities with a clear authority to audit the distribution of fines, fees, assessments and administrative costs for criminal and traffic violations;
2. Enact legislation that changes the "Priority Distribution" mandate so cities receive the total cost of issuing, processing and testifying in court on criminal cases and traffic violations; and
3. That any reduction in fines, fees, assessments or costs should be equally distributed from the total fine imposed, not just from the city base fine.

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Background Information on Resolution No. 1

Source: City of Glendora

Background:

Court-ordered debt collection and revenue distribution is a complex system where there are few audits, if ever, done to determine if cities are receiving their fair share of disbursements. The current system makes it practically impossible for cities to effectively administer and manage public funds that are generated by cities. Because of the complex system cities cannot determine if they are receiving their fair share of the fines collected.

Once a debt has been collected, in whole or in part, distributing the money is not simple as there are over 150 ways collection entities are required to distribute revenue collected from traffic and criminal court debts, depending on the fine, fee, surcharge or penalty assessment imposed by the court and California has more than 3,100 separate court fines, fees, surcharges, penalties and assessments levied on offenders that appear in statutes spanning 27 different government code.

County and state have statutory responsibility and power to conduct their audits, while cities do not currently have clear legal standing to demand access to court records for purposes of conducting audits in a thorough and transparent manner which further shrouds the understanding of when and how revenue is distributed.

At the request of the City of Glendora, in December 2011, the Los Angeles Superior Court conducted a sample audit of 15 Glendora Police Department-issued citations from 2010. The results of the sample audit revealed the Glendora received about 12% (\$253) of the \$2,063 in paid fines for the 12 of the 15 citations submitted. Three (3) of the citations in the audit had been sent to collection or warrants. Based on those results, the city received an average of \$21, while the state and county received an average of \$172 for each of the 12 citations. The percentage breakdown for the city was 12.25% as compared to the state and county's share of 86.75.%

Issuing a typical vehicle code violation citation can involve up to an hour of the issuing officer's time and the records clerk tasked with entering citations into the database costing approximately \$82 per hour. If the citation is challenged the cost increases another \$135 to cover the cost of court time and handling of the notices associated with such an appeal. Therefore, the cost incurred to issue a citation that is currently between \$82 about \$217, while the sample audit reveals the city is receiving about \$21 in cost recovery.

Officials with Superior Court openly admit that similar results would be expected for almost every jurisdiction in the state because when a court reduces a fine it triggers a process called "Priority Distribution." This process prohibits Judges from reducing penalty assessments imposed by the county and state and thus the only discretion that Judges have in reducing fines is to reduce the Base Fine (City Portion) of the total fine. This mandate has a significant impact on the amount of money cities issuing the citation receive. Rarely is the reduction in the fine taken from other stakeholders. Cities are one of the lowest priority on the distribution so often they find themselves receiving significantly less share-or no share after deducting state and county fees and surcharges.

The primary cost to implement enforcement falls upon local law enforcement agencies throughout the state. This Resolution calls upon the State Legislature and Governor to create an efficient system to provide cities with a clear authority to audit the distribution of fines, fees, assessments and administrative costs for criminal and traffic violations. In addition, legislation should be developed and passed that changes the "Priority Distribution" mandate so the cities receive the total cost of issuing, processing and testifying in court on criminal cases and traffic violations and that any reduction in fines, fees, assessments or costs should be equally distributed from the total fine imposed.

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League of California Cities Staff Analysis on Resolution No. 1

Staff: Dorothy Holzem, Assoc. Legislative Representative, (916) 658-8214
Committee: Public Safety Policy Committee

Staff: Dan Carrigg, Legislative Representative, (916) 658-8222
Committee: Revenue and Taxation Policy Committee

Summary:

This Resolution urges the League of California Cities, through legislative or administrative means, to clarify the authority for cities to audit the distribution of court imposed fines, fees, penalty assessments and administrative costs for criminal and traffic violations.

It also urges the League to seek legislative changes to the "Priority Distribution" statutory formula so that cities receive the total cost of issuing, processing and testifying in court on criminal cases and traffic violations. The current statutory formula allows reductions to the base fine but maintains the same level of penalty assessments, based upon the full penalty charge.

Finally, any reductions that may occur in fines, fees, assessments or costs determinations should be equally distributed from the total fine imposed, not just from the city base fine.

This Resolution raises several policy questions:

- 1) Should cities have the authority to request audits and receive reports from a county or the state on the local share of revenue resulting from criminal and traffic violation penalties?
- 2) Should cost-recovery be a driving factor in setting monetary penalties for criminal or traffic violations?
- 3) Should reductions (as ordered by a judge) to the fines owed by violators be taken just out of the base fine, or should the base fine and related penalty assessments be reduced proportionately?

Background:

In California, criminal offenders may have additional penalty assessments made to their base fines. These penalty assessments are based on the concept of an "abusers fee," in which those who break certain laws will help finance programs related to decreasing those violations. For example, drug and alcohol offenses and domestic violence offenses are enhanced by special assessments on fines that directly fund county programs designed to prevent the violations. All other criminal offenses and traffic violations are subject to penalty assessments that are used to fund specific state programs.

According to the Resolution sponsor, the City of Glendora, the court-ordered collection of penalty fines and additional assessments, as well as the subsequent revenue distribution, is a complex system where few audits are conducted to determine if cities are receiving their share of collections. The current system makes it practically impossible for cities to effectively administer and manage public funds that are generated by cities.

The League recently held in-depth policy discussions related to audit authority in light of the misconduct charges against the City of Bell in 2011. The League convened a technical working group to review audit legislation and administrative efforts by the State Controller's Office. Following the work of this group, the League Board adopted principles supporting transparent, accurate financial and performance information. (See "Existing Policy" section below.) However, these principles did not address expanding cities' audit authority over the state, counties, or other public agencies.

The sponsors state that there are over 150 ways collection entities are required to distribute revenue collected from traffic and criminal court debts. Depending on the fine, fee, surcharge or penalty assessment imposed, there are more than 3,100 separate court fines, fees, surcharges, penalties and assessments levied on offenders that appear in statutes spanning 27 different state code sections.

Generally, the base fines for criminal and traffic citations are significantly lower than the additional penalty assessments levied by the state and counties. In some instances, the penalty assessment for state and local programs can be three or four times the amount collected by the city or county agency that issued the citation through their local enforcement authority. The amount each program account receives is based on a statutory formula. For example, if a driving under the influence (DUI) fine is \$1000, specific dollar amounts proportionate to the base fine are added under six different code sections for a total price tag of \$3,320 for the offense.

Some examples of program accounts receiving penalty assessment revenues include Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST), victim witness protection and services, court security, court construction, forensic laboratories for DNA identification, and automated fingerprint identification. The impact of programs largely funded, if not solely funded, by penalty assessment revenue casts a wide net of stakeholders including counties, sheriffs, district attorneys, public defenders, fish and game wardens, victim advocates, and access to the judicial system advocates. Cities are also partial benefactors of penalty assessment funded programs related to law enforcement.

For the last three decades, this policy area has been under great scrutiny and study but with little reform taking place. The recommendations from past studies and reports to consolidate penalty assessment accounts or their collections efforts, which would require legislative action, have likely not gained traction because of the inevitable loss of revenue for the specific programs and the affected interest groups.

In 1986, the Legislature enacted Senate Concurrent Resolution 53, requiring the Legislative Analyst Office (LAO) to study the statutory penalty assessments that are levied by the courts on offenders and the state programs that the funds support. The completed 1988 study found a complicated system of collection and distribution of penalty funds. The LAO was unable to fully identify the source offenses that generated penalty revenues because of limitations in most county collection systems.

In 2005, the California Research Bureau issued a report for the Assembly Public Safety Committee on county penalty assessments that drew similar conclusions. They stated the complexity of the system means poor revenue collection, disproportionate justice for debtors, and undermines the usefulness of fines as a punishment or deterrent. They recommended efforts to streamline and consolidate collections, funding, and appropriations.

After some delay, the state created the Administrative Office of the Court's Court-Ordered Debt Task Force, which is charged with evaluating and exploring means to streamline the existing structure for imposing and distributing criminal and traffic fines and fees. This Task Force has been asked to present preliminary recommendations to the Legislature regarding the priority in which court-ordered debt should be satisfied and the use of comprehensive collection programs. Currently, the League of California Cities has two appointments to the Task Force. However, the Task Force has been put on hiatus and has not met for approximately 12 months due to significant state cuts to the court budget in recent years.

Currently, legislation was introduced this year to address the issue of cities not recouping the costs of issuing citations. The response has been to increase the base fine and not change penalty assessments. Assembly Bill 2366 (Eng) would increase the base fine of "fix-it" tickets from \$10 to \$25 dollars. This has largely been successful in the legislative fiscal committees because with every increase to the base fine for the issuing agency, so increases the state and county share of penalty assessments proportionately.

Lastly, in most instances when the legislature takes into consideration a fine increase, be it for manufacturer product responsibility or criminal acts, the legislature focuses on how the increased fine will alter behavior, not on recovering the costs of enforcing that violation.

Fiscal Impact:

Unknown. Potential additional revenue received by cities, if any, would vary based on total citations issued and collected.

Existing League Policy:

Related to this Resolution, existing policy offers:

- Cities and the League should continue to emphasize efficiency and effectiveness, encouraging and assisting cities to achieve the best possible use of city resources.
- The League supports efforts to preserve local authority and accountability for cities, state policies must ensure the integrity of existing city revenue sources for all cities, including the city share and situs allocation, where applicable, of property tax, sales tax, vehicle license fee, etc.

Audit Principles Adopted by the League Board

- Given the State already has substantial authority to examine local government financial practices, and recognizes the significant resources required by auditors and local governments to complete audits, additional authority should only be granted to a State agency when there are documented insufficiencies in its existing authority.
- Governmental financial audits and performance audits ensure financial integrity and promote efficient, effective and accountable local government.
- Transparent, accurate financial and performance information is necessary for citizens to have confidence that their interests are being served, and for decision makers to be accountable for ensuring that public funds are spent appropriately and effectively.
- Public trust is inspired when auditors perform their work with independence, objectivity and integrity, remaining free from personal, external and organizational impairments to that independence, both in fact and in appearance.
- Public confidence in government is maintained and strengthened when financial and performance information is collected, managed and reported in accordance with nationally recognized professional accounting and auditing standards.

The League's Mission Statement is "to expand and protect local control for cities through education and advocacy to enhance the quality of life for all Californians."

In addition, the Strategic Priorities for 2012, as adopted by the League Board of Directors, are to:

1) Support Sustainable and Secure Public Employee Pensions and Benefits: Work in partnership with state leaders and other stakeholders to promote sustainable and secure public pensions and other post-employment benefits (OPEBs) to help ensure responsive and affordable public services for the people of our state and cities.

2) Promote Local Control for Strong Cities: Support or oppose legislation and proposed constitutional amendments based on whether they advance maximum local control by city governments over city revenues,

land use, redevelopment and other private activities to advance the public health, safety and welfare of city residents.

3) Build Strong Partnerships for a Stronger Golden State: Collaborate with other public and private groups and leaders to reform the structure and governance, and promote transparency, fiscal integrity, and responsiveness of our state government and intergovernmental system.